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Interview with Joseph Johnson

Cecil B. Currey

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Side 1 - Interview (telephone) with Joseph Johnson - 29 January 1986 - page 1

X: Cecil Currey?

C: Yes.

He said that you were a member of his team in Vietnam and maybe you could tell me such things as when you went to work for him and your role.

X: Well, Cecil, that isn't quite accurate. What I did was to find occasion to visit Saigon while he and his team were there and active way back in '55 I guess it was.

C: Saigon Military Mission?

X: That's right. And it was my privilege to visit and to be taken into his confidence while there and to observe the activities of the times. That was at the time of the beginning of the great migration from the north to the south. You remember that?

C: I do.

X: ...Haiphong, the U.S. Navy put its boats at their disposal. And that was going on when I was there. Operation Brotherhood was going on-- you have heard of that?

C: Yes.

X: And I was able to observe some of their _____? and after a very short stay I had to leave and went on back to Japan to see to my duties. And that was the extent of my association with the Lansdale team.

C: Well, then let me ask you a couple of other questions.

X: It was just an association. I was not really part of it. In all modesty I must say that.

C: I see an M.D. behind your name. Were you a physician at that time?

X: Oh, yeah.

C: Ok. What was your role? What took you from Japan to Vietnam?

X: I went to do a survey or do a quick look-at available medical facilities for support of our personnel there at the time.

C: Were you also working for CIA?

X: Yes, but don't put that in your report, please.

C: All right.

X: ...because some of the people I knew then and have known many years since say behind the Iron Curtain are still alive and they didn't know that. Really, in all seriousness, strike that out.

C: I will be glad to, and it really doesn't make any difference for my purposes.

When you were there, you said that you got to observe Lansdale and his team. Could you tell me some of the things you saw.

X: Let's see. Did he give you the names of any of his other team members?

C: Yeah, I know people like Lou Conein and Joe Baker and the tall guy who builds airports...

X: Rufus Phillips?

C: Rufus Phillips, right. Joe Reddick, Sam Carrick. I talked with most of these people.

X: Well, and Col. Jorgenson (sp?)

C: No, now that is a new name.

X: Well, Jorgie was there.

C: Now what was his first name, Mr. Jensen-(sp?) Johnson?

X: I don't know. I just knew him as Col. Jorgenson. I can't remember. Maybe it will come to be but it will be very difficult. He now lives in

X: Friday (sp?) Harbor of San Juan Islands in the middle of Puget (sp?) Sound. If he is still there. He went out there to retire.

I can tell you one interesting episode. Well, one evening Ed sent everybody out on different errands, put it that way. And he allowed me to go with Jorgy, Col. Jorgenson. At the time the French still retained control of the ^{Surút} Sirutay in the center of the city of Saigon. Have you been there?

C: No, but the Vietnamese may let me in one of these days. I have applied for permission to enter their country.

X: Well, you won't see much of what was there then. Well, the Sirutay was either one full block or two full city blocks, squared off, walled in area in the middle of Saigon. It might have been one city block. As I recall it looked like it was about 4. And the Sirutay was run by, was occupied by the ^{Binh Xuyen} Benzuian (phonetic) sect who were under the control and direction of the French, unlike the other sects. And they were in uniform, soldiers garrisoned in the Sirutay building or compound. From that compound there had been on a few occasions, a couple, a mortar shell lobbed over toward the palace, over a period of several weeks.

C: From the Sirutay compound.

X: Yes, so far as it was known. I remember something vague about some nutty pilot even dropping a bomb or trying to drop a small incendiary ^{business} something near the palace. But that wasn't Sirutay, that wasn't Benzuian, that was just rumor I think. In any event, President Diem requested the French to put a control on this and to stop it. But they didn't. And then Diem had a very small, the beginnings of, and it wasn't all that small either, of a Nationalist Army. You remember that?

C: Yes.

X: And they were uniformed in red berets. The Benzuian were uniformed

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X: in green berets. Well, Jorgy and I drove off in that little car, went over to the cathedral with a large flagstone open area, and we could see from the Church side one corner of the Sirutay compound. About the time we arrived we saw a French officer in his car riding across the flagstone square in a great rush to get home, because something was coming up. Also at that time a truck full of Nationalist soldiers with their red berets and bandoliers (sp?) it appeared of ammunition, grenades around their belts, pulled up full of soldiers and stopped at one corner facing us. Another truck pulled right in behind them, and another truck behind them, until that whole street down that side of the compound was full, back to front, with trucks with soldiers in them. This was dead of night. There were enough street lights for us to see clearly what was going on. Then one soldier got out; there was total silence--one soldier got out of the truck, walked over to the compound wall and sailed his red beret over the wall. In one flash of a minute a green beret came sailing out, and I don't know how many soldiers came scrambling over the wall into the arms of the Nationalist soldiers. They helped them into the truck, and then it was repeated again. And then two red berets went over, reddish brown, and two green berets came back, and then two soldiers. And then it developed into kind of a flood of berets all the way down that long street, over the wall, green berets coming out, and then soldiers climbing over after them, until the trucks were completely filled with the Benzuian soldiers, all happily and cheerfully received in these trucks. What a sight. And then when it was all over, the trucks quietly circled the compound and drove back down to their barracks and headquarters, leaving not one Benzuian soldier inside of the compound, and not one shot was fired. So Jorgy and I, and everything was perfectly quiet after that, the French opened up one of the big drive-through gates in the wall along one side wall where the

X: trucks had been. And an automobile with French officers in it drove in there in great haste. Now inside was a building that had sort of drive through arch, you could see through it, you could even drive a truck through it. And a light was on. Jorgy and I rode by the outer wall opening, looked in; there was a light from the ceiling in the building, you could see in it, you could drive a truck through it. Do you get the picture?

C: Yes.

X: And it was a table there and a French Col. or General one, couldn't make his rank out, was pounding the table and screaming at his officers in rage at allowing the Benzuians to escape like that, and turn sides and become part of President Diem's Army. Then we drove home, back to Ed's house, came in, and Rufus and a couple of others had already come back from whatever they were doing. And so Jorgy and I came in, and Jorgy sort of smiled and shrugged his shoulders and looked at Ed, and Ed sort of smiled at him and shrugged his soldiers, and not a word was said about it. How do you like them apples?

C: Interesting. How had he arranged a thing like that?

X: It was a complete surprise to me, and I never heard a word about it since.

C: Amazing. Well, that is a good story, Mr. Johnson/~~Jensen??~~.

X: Long after I was over there I was reading notes about news from Vietnam, that, what was his name at the Riviera?

C: Oh, Bao Dai. (sp??)

X: Bao Dai, the prince.

C: Yes.

X: Now his father lived in Hue (sp??) didn't he?

C: Yes.

X: The King.

C: The old Imperial Palace there.

X: That's right. There came a time for the King's birthday, and Bao Dai was in France. This is what I think I read in the news as a clipping. Ed Lansdale flew up to Hue, in a DC 3 I guess, and came bearing gifts and presents to the King for his birthday. And I think there was some sort of platform out there where he could stand and be seen in front of all his populace--the King.

C: Yes.

X: Meanwhile, Bao Dai was in France, and it was obvious, he sent no greetings to his father and, as I recall and you can check this out--it was on the news--I think the King denounced his son, Bao Dai, on that occasion and figuratively adopted Ed Lansdale. You never heard that?

C: I surely have not.

X: That is what I think I recall reading in the paper.

C: Well, I can check with Ed on that, too.

X: Yeah, I have been curious and I have failed to bring it up to him.

C: I see you live right there in McLean, probably right around the corner from him.

X: It's across town a little bit--it's 8 or 10 minutes away, and I see him fairly frequently. Let me write down your name before I forget it.

(omitted) (conversation about Sandy Moffitt--asks you to call Sandy for him)

X: I don't have that many anecdotes; you see I was just there for a short period of time, a little less than two weeks, around ten days. As a visitor I can't claim the honor of being an actual member of his team. But he treated me with such noble courtesy that he made me feel wonderfully at home.

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C: He has that ability with people. (discussion about his ill health)

X: I feel flattered that he even named me as a member of the team, so to speak.

C: Yeah, that is the note I have down--member of team in Vietnam.

(Laughter)

X: I am going to kid him with that one.

C: I guess you can be a team member, if only for 10 days.

X: Yeah.

C: Where was he living at that point?

X: He was living in a two-storied _____ house. I don't recall the address, and it served as both his residence and his office.

C: Yeah, he liked to do that. I know later on when he was in Saigon he had a two-story house on Kong Lee (sp?) Street.

X: It could have been the same house.

C: Well, could have been.

X: But I don't know.

I used to observe during that time almost every other night around two in the morning a call would come from the Palace and the President's secretary would be on the line: "Would Ed be so kind as to come over and pay a visit and talk to Diem".

C: At 2 in the morning?

X: Something like that. It was late enough not to be observed, and a young Lt., Hanrahan I think, was there and helped to get me in the house in the first place, and he would hear the telephone, wake Ed up, and I never saw such a skilled flurry of activity. He would shave and dress in proper military uniform and be downstairs with Hanrahan in the car in the space of 2 to 3 to 4 minutes. He said, "I never presume on anything except proper dress in the presence of a President".

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X: He was that way with Magsaysay in the Philippines as well. Did you know that?

C: Yes, I did know they were very close and he was always correct with him.

X: Oh, yeah.

I think once he recognized the Huk character coming down a line, a reception sort of line and turned out to be armed and they stopped him. And it was an obvious attempt to get at and assassinate Magsaysay. You never heard that?

C: No, I certainly didn't.

X: Don't put that down as absolute fact. Check it out.

C: Yeah, a lot of these things that different people tell me, I check back with General Lansdale.

X: Now I am just inferring what happened on the King's birthday up at Hue from that little clipping I saw in the newspaper. It was a fact that Ed was up there, flew, said something about presents, and somewhere else I got the notation of the fact that was the occasion the King denounced Bao Dai and in effect, publically adopted Ed. You would have to check that one.

C: Yes. But it is a great story.

(conversation about calling you back if he thinks of anything else)

X: You know, that time over at the Sirutay headquarters compound was a hair raiser. Tense, possible fighting, absolute quiet, and clearly understanding on both sides as to what was going to happen.

C: Except for the French General I guess.

X: Yes. (laughter)

(conversation omitted about him calling you back. He had a cousin

prominent in teaching circles in Florida, Robert Davidson)

C: You have been a real help.

X: You evoke a lot of old memories.

(laughter)

C: Well, I hope so.

END OF INTERVIEW

C: I have been talking to Joseph Johnson, a doctor of medicine who lives in McLean, Virginia. This is the 29th of January, 1986. The telephone call began about 4:45.